

"Great Writers."

REFERENCE



LIFE OF JOHN RUSKIN.

LIFE
OF
JOHN RUSKIN.

BY
ASHMORE WINGATE.

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TO
LLORA F. WATSON,
THE LIFE OF THE GREATEST OF ART CRITICS,
TO ONE WHO IS AN ARTIST.

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LIFE OF RUSKIN.

FIRST QUARTER.

PARENTAGE—EARLY LIFE—FIRST BOOKS

(1819-43).

CHAPTER I.

[1819-33.]

WATERLOO was won at Moscow. By this we mean that the Russian campaign, by extirpating a large part of the soldierly manhood of France, and giving the necessary breathing-space to the many enemies of Napoleon, thereby dooming him, with one nation at his back, to fight a world, while Wellington, with a world at his back, fought one nation, the Russian campaign may be held as the remote cause of the Belgian victory.

And this historical *mot* proves to be a very useful text, from which many sermons can be preached if necessary. For in almost every life it will be found that some antecedent circumstance, often some very small thing indeed, must at the last analysis have been the seed of what appears as an isolated phenomenon and glory. So we do

not think it any exaggeration to assert that if the father of John Ruskin had sold a few hundreds of butts of sherry less his son would not have attained the almost pontifical position—for so it came to be—that he has held in the æsthetic domain of our own time.

Few men of genius have owed so much to preceding external conditions of environment as John Ruskin owed to them; and this statement is, of course, to be considered in connection with the truth that the sphere in which John Ruskin was (and is) great, is a sphere to which only a man rich and far-travelled could gain entrance, even in much later days than those which saw the issue of *Modern Painters*. The farmer Burns required not much more than his own genius, and some cheap writing-paper, to take the world by assault; Madame Albani would conceivably have needed nothing of importance beyond her voice and some evening gowns; G. F. Watts had the expense of a few informal years at an art school. But to acquaint oneself with all the best paintings in four-fifths of the galleries of Europe, spending five guineas in driving to see a particular etching, having a scaffold erected in a cathedral chapel, making presents to abbots to gain private views of things not else to be seen, to give to one's criticisms the wide range of a Bædeker's Handbook—all this involves an enormous expenditure. Imagination is a cheap thing, but observation is a dear thing. And Ruskin's life was one long observation, redeemed, of course, by imagination, inspiration, and eloquence.

While we do not say, and would never dream of saying, that Ruskin, if born in a less fortunate position, would not have been a great man, we do say that he would not have been our foremost artistic philosopher. And now, with this short apology, some little time may be spent in considering his parentage and early years, chiefly in the light shed by his own loving memories.

The father, John Ruskin, senior, was a man of a remarkable type, who combined an extraordinary keenness in his trade of wine-merchant with tireless appreciation of all beauty, whether real or ideal, whether amid the peaks of the Apennines or in the works of the noblest poets, a man of the sort whose scarcity was deplored by Matthew Arnold in the course of his reflections upon a nation of Philistines. He came of a race originally English, but resident latterly in Edinburgh, and lastly in Perth, and seems to have had a somewhat unpractical and even spendthrift being for his immediate progenitor, according to all accounts; assuredly, the author of *Præterita* is very reticent concerning his grandsire, and where he is reticent others do not require to be communicative.

But it must be recorded that John Ruskin, senior, while yet a youth in the Fair City, had the mortification of seeing his father declining both physically and financially, and ultimately stood, a man entirely penniless, by the death-bed of an unfortunate bankrupt. Then, indeed, he showed what manner of soul he possessed. He went finally to London, where he had served already in various capacities,